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Bewitching the Box Office: Harry Potter and Religious Controversy

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Abstract
The cultural phenomenon produced in recent years by the *Harry Potter* books and films has sparked outrage among critics and avid devotion from supporters. This article examines the debate through the implementation of three dichotomies that help to define the approaches people typically take to the *Harry Potter* stories: 1) fantasy vs. reality, 2) good versus evil, and 3) secular versus religious. As I demonstrate through an examination of these dichotomies and their application, the public debate about *Harry Potter* encourages us to reexamine the import and meaning of the separation of church and state.

J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* grossed $90.3 million in the first weekend in theatres in 2001, and the sequel, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, nearly matched that record with $87.4 million in the first weekend.[1] The films are based closely on the first two books of a seven-volume projected series about *Harry Potter*, a boy who discovers that he is a wizard and embarks on a series of adventures centered on his residence at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Four of the books are already on shelves. *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, the fifth volume, is projected to be released on June 21, 2003, and the third film, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, will be released in 2004. The books and the films have caused uproar among some conservative Christian communities, and fervor among loyal fans who lovingly don robes reminiscent of Harry's and dab lightning bolts onto their foreheads while uttering incantations. Everyone seems agreed that some important issues are on the table, but no one seems exactly sure what these are, or why we should or should not be concerned about the mania surrounding Harry Potter.

This essay asks exactly that question: Why have the *Harry Potter* books and films provoked such enthusiastic celebration and simultaneously such harsh scrutiny? I examine the religious controversy through a series of three dichotomies that reflect how both defenders and critics have viewed the phenomenon, in order to clarify the shape of the controversy and to suggest that at least one pivotal issue

underlying this phenomenon is the growing uncertainty among Americans about what separation of church and state really means in the modern world.

I. Fantasy versus Reality

Supporters of *Harry Potter* claim almost unequivocally that the books and films should be considered fantasy, and as such, are harmless to children. Far from representing a real world of witchcraft, the *Harry Potter* works draw a clear distinction between the fantasy world of Hogwarts and the "real" world of us Muggles. Like J.R.R. Tolkein's *Lord of the Rings* series and C. S. Lewis's *Narnia* series, say supporters, in *Harry Potter*, J. K. Rowling presents an alternative reality that is attractive, entertaining, and above all, purely imaginative.

In an interview with Diane Rehm for National Public Radio, Rowling freely admits that in the preparation of her books, she does "a certain amount of research. And folklore is quite important in books. So where I'm mentioning a creature, or a spell that people used to believe genuinely worked; of course it didn't ... then, I will find out exactly what the characteristics of that creature or ghost were supposed to be."[2] Rowling asserts that she is "not in the slightest" personally drawn to practicing magic or witchcraft. Instead, she says that "there's a kind of magic that happens when you pick up a wonderful book and it lives with you for the rest of your life ... There is magic in friendship and in beauty ... metaphorical magic, yes. [But] do I

believe if you draw a funny squiggly shape on the ground and dance around it, [then something will happen, then] not at all. I find the idea rather comical" (ibid.). Supporters of *Harry Potter* argue that the books are literature, and do not resemble Wiccan practice in any meaningful way. Michael G. Maudlin of *Christianity Today* concurs with Rowling, saying that "we have committed a fault of logic in saying that reading about witches and wizards necessarily translates into these occult practices."[3]

Richard Abanes, one of the most vocal critics of *Harry Potter*, acknowledges that "most fans of the *Harry Potter* series believe that nearly everything in the books are [sic] mere product of Rowling's fertile imagination.'[4] He also accepts that Rowling has "studied mythology and witchcraft in order to write her books more accurately" (23); however, Abanes sees a more sinister function to Rowling's incorporation of legitimate historical materials. Says Abanes, the "vast amount of the occult material [Rowling] has borrowed from historical sources still plays a significant role in modern paganism and witchcraft." He argues that the books and films "could easily present a spiritual danger to children and teens, or even adults, who are either leaning toward occultism or who may be vulnerable to its attractions" (24). In other words, simply by reading *Harry Potter*, a child could be drawn to "real" occult practices, whether or not the books and films are faithful representations of such practices.

Berit Kjos, in "Bewitched by *Harry Potter*," concurs. The "haunted grounds of Hogwarts," he says, "may be out-of-this-world, but with its blend of earthly familiarity and practical magic, it has captivated more than seven million minds." Kjos goes even further, pointing out what he sees to be the malevolent forces behind the works, adding that "these stories are every bit as spiritual as Christian literature, but the spiritual power they promote comes from other gods."[5] Says Lindy Beam of Focus on the Family, "Help your children see that there is a real world of witchcraft that is not pleasing to God. This way you will teach your children to ... avoid the misconception that witches and wizards are merely harmless fantasy."[6] For these critics, the world of witchcraft is real, dangerous, and seductive.

Robert S. McGee and Caryl Matrischiana, producers of a video called *Harry Potter: Witchcraft Repackaged*? argue that there is little or no distinction between reading about witchcraft in Rowling' books, engaging in nature-oriented worship, or participating in Satanism. For them, the movement from *Harry Potter* to the worst abuses of non-traditional religious movements is a slippery slope with no return. Matrischiana and McGee would be completely unfazed by the argument that *Harry Potter* does not offer a faithful representation of Wicca as it is practiced today. For them, any depiction of witchcraft is dangerous. They are especially critical of Rowling's depiction of children engaging in practices labeled "witchcraft" since they argue, Harry, Ron, and Hermione serve as role models, and

even seemingly benign depictions of witchcraft may open the door to more baleful influences.[7]

Not all conservative Christians take this approach, however. In her book *What's a Christian to Do with Harry Potter?* Connie Neal recognizes that the real dividing point in the debate among Christians is the issue of fantasy versus reality.[8] Posing the hypothetical question, "What do the books actually say about witchcraft and wizardry?" Neal replies: "The answer depends on whether the questioner means 'real occult witchcraft in the real world' or 'witchcraft and wizardry' as it is defined and set up in the fantasy world created by J. K. Rowling. Whichever primary mental file a person draws upon will have a lot do with how he or she answers that question" (57). Neal sees the *Harry Potter* books as fantasy, but sees witchcraft as a real threat apart from the books, and therefore she insists that the books and films be consumed under the watchful eyes of Christian parents.

Neal even provides a helpful guide to "protect kids from spiritual forces of evil" that might be a potential threat if parents fail to distinguish between the "real" world of the occult and the "fantasy world" of *Harry Potter*. Her advice includes using the Bible as a point of reference in reading; distinguishing between magic in the fantasy genre and magic in "real life settings," never engaging in witchcraft, never consulting the dead, never practicing sorcery or interpreting omens, and even the surprising recommendation to never offer your children as a human sacrifice![9]

Nevertheless, Neal is representative of many supporters when she argues that "reading *Harry Potter* is not the same as practicing witchcraft or even - as some assert - promoting it" (88). However, based on her reading of Paul, she argues that just as some Christians in the early church might misunderstand the new freedom under the law that makes eating meat sacrificed to idols acceptable for those in the know,[10] so some Christians might be troubled by Harry Potter, and thus should understandably stay away from the books and films.

The dichotomy of fantasy versus reality is a cogent means of defining perspectives in regard to the *Harry Potter* phenomena. Supporters argue that *Harry Potter* is a work of fantasy appropriate for consumption by children, some say with parental guidance. Both Christians and non-Christians argue this point. Critics exhibit horror at the thought that children might fall down a slippery slope to the occult through the seemingly benign introduction to witchcraft in *Harry Potter*, whereas supporters identify the *Harry Potter* books and films as a harmless journey through an imaginative world. The critical position assumes a dualism of good and evil to be an authentic paradigm for defining the world. This position also implies that viewing or reading questionable material causes real changes in the mental state of the person consuming the material, inviting them to edge closer to the darker side and distancing them from the forces of good and from a guarantee of

salvation. Thus, the dichotomy of fantasy versus reality leads us inevitably to a second dichotomy defining opinions about Harry Potter: good versus evil.

II. Good versus Evil

Supporters of *Harry Potter*, both Christian and secular, claim that Harry Potter is above all a moral character, and sets an example that they would like to have their own children emulate. Michael G. Maudlin of *Christianity Today* says that in the face of Harry's difficult life (the death of his parents, ostracism from his peers, a difficult life with his aunt and uncle) "he gets discouraged and angry, but overall he displays courage, loyalty, compassion, joy, humility, even love" (3). The editors of *Christianity Today* enthusiastically advise parents to read the books to their children. They recommend the first *Harry Potter* work as a "Book of Virtues with a preadolescent funny bone." In *Harry Potter*, they argue, one will find "wonderful examples of compassion, loyalty, courage, friendship, and even self-sacrifice. No wonder young readers want to be like these believable characters. That is a Christmas present we can be grateful for" (January 2000). Harry Potter is heralded as a "good" kid, since he takes risks for his friends, fights for justice and truth, and displays some of the human virtues most worthy of praise.

Connie Neal agrees. Applying the popular Christian paradigm, "What Would Jesus Do?" she asks, "What Would Jesus Do with Harry Potter?" Her

answers are telling; Jesus would use the *Harry Potter* stories "as parables" to spark children's interest in the battle between good and evil; Jesus might look at poor Harry's early childhood and offer him love and encouragement; he might compare the "trustworthy goodness" of Albus Dumbledore (the head wizard) to the "infinitely superior goodness of God the Father;" Jesus might draw a parallel between the invitation to enter the otherworldly realm of Hogwarts with the Christian's invitation to enter the kingdom of God; and finally, Jesus might show children that just as Harry entered a magical door to platform nine and three-quarters the "magic door" to God's kingdom is the "magical transport" that is Jesus (90). Overwhelmed with her own allegories, Neal exclaims, "Oh, there's a lot Jesus might do with Harry Potter!" (ibid.). The book ends with her descriptions of personal evangelism, using Harry Potter as the model for a "good" Christian life.

When J. K. Rowling was asked by Diane Rehm about good and evil in the *Harry Potter* series, she acknowledged the stories' complex representation of morality. Says Rowling, the *Harry Potter* books are "scary in exactly the same way as the *Grimm's Fairy Tales*." Original Grimm's fairy tales are told for children to "explore darkest fears, that's why they endure." They include figures typically considered evil, such as the archetypes of the wicked stepmother; such evil images "crop up again and again." Rowling says that in their original form, the Grimms fairy tales "are brutal, they are frightening, I think more than anything I have written

so far." Children today, she notes, have the same fears as those who first read the Grimms fairy tales, and "literature is an excellent way ... a fabulous way to explore those things." Although Rowling, as she herself puts it, doesn't "try to make enormous points" to "teach children anything," the stories are "moral because it is a battle between good and evil." In her view, it would be a mistake "to pretend to children that life is sanitized and easy when they already know ... that life can be very difficult if it hasn't happened in their own family, then one of their own friends' fathers will be dying they're in contact with this from a very early age; it's not a bad idea that they meet this in literature."

Rowling intends to present Harry as a sort of role model. She says, "Harry is a human boy. He makes mistakes, but I think of him as a very noble character. He's a brave character, and he strives to do the right thing ... to see a fictional character dealing with those sorts of things I think can be very helpful" (Rehm interview). Seeing the books presenting a clear demarcation between forces of good and forces of evil, and seeing the likes of Harry and Dumbledore as representatives of the forces of good, supporters see the books and films as helpful tools for children in the development of their own moral compasses.

Critics do not see such a clear divide between the forces of good and the forces of evil in *Harry Potter* books and films. In fact, they see Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, and even Hermione Granger as negative models for children to follow.

Issuing the charge of moral relativism against Rowling's works, Richard Abanes says that the "morals and ethics in Rowling's fantasy tales are at best unclear, and at worst, patently unbiblical" (35). Harry Potter repeatedly disobeys his instructors and is rarely punished; in fact, Abanes complains, "rather than following any objective standard of right and wrong (i.e. Hogwarts' rules), Harry lets his own self-interests and subjective rationalizations determine his actions" (ibid.).

Harshly criticizing what he calls "Potterethics," Abanes catalogs what he sees to be morally questionable material in the books and films. For example, in *The Sorcerer's Stone*, prompted by Draco Malfoy's jeers, Harry disobeys Madame Hooch when directly told not to ride his broomstick, and is rewarded with a spot on the Quidditch team. Harry agrees to meet Draco in the middle of the night to duel him, disobeying school rules about wandering around at night, a rule that Harry and his friends break repeatedly. When Harry sneaks to the Mirror of Erised in the darkest hours and is discovered there by Dumbledore, he is only mildly chastised, and not at all rebuked for breaking house rules. Harry also breaks school rules by reading books on Dark Magic and following Professor Snape into the Forbidden Forest. Hermione, at least at first, tries to rein in Harry and Ron's wanderlust, being dubbed by them a know-it-all and "an angry goose" with a "bad temper." Eventually, Hermione earns their friendship through a lie and joins them in their nighttime adventures. Hermione even casts a "Body Bind" spell on Neville so that

he will not stop them from leaving the dorm at night. Similar escapades take place in the second film and book, facilitated by Harry's invisibility cloak.

Also, in the second book and film, Harry, Ron and Hermione concoct a potion to make them look like Draco Malfoy's friends, so they can eavesdrop on Draco. Even Hagrid and Professor McGonagall present questionable role models in Abanes' opinion, since Hagrid performs magic against Dumbledore's express orders, and McGonagall breaks school rules to put Harry on the Quidditch team. Abanes sums up the problem: "The threefold moral message that Rowling presents through her characters is clear: 1) rules are made to be broken if they do not serve one's own self-interests; 2) rules need not be obeyed if no good reason seems to exist for them 3) lying is an effective and acceptable means of achieving a desired end" (38). Abanes even goes so far as to argue that this moral relativism is comparable to the Wiccan creed "If it harm none, do what you will." Abanes says, "Whether Rowling realizes it or not, she is promoting witchcraft/occultism/Wicca in the form of ethical and moral subjectivism" (39). Abanes, then, is arguing that moral relativism, which he believes to characterize the *Potter* stories, is equivalent to the Wiccan worldview. The idea that one of the greatest dangers of witchcraft is a subjective morality is one that crops up repeatedly in the opinions of similar critics, who feel more comfortable with conviction in an absolute morality based on their own reading of the Bible.

Supporters of *Harry Potter* identify him as a moral character worthy of emulation, human, but striving to become a better person, fighting evil at every turn. Critics argue that Harry Potter is a questionable role model, and the lines between good and evil much more difficult to discern in the books and films, and the failure to do so is seen to be much more spiritually precarious. Whereas supporters of Harry Potter can be found in both Christian and non-Christian camps, critics tend to be defined by their conservative Christian stance, fearful that the lack of black and white moral guidelines in the stories about Harry Potter make him a dangerous model for children to emulate and call into question the absolute morality they argue is apparent in reading the Bible.

III. Secular versus Religious

The third and final dichotomy in the *Harry Potter* debate is the issue of whether the books and films should be viewed as secular or as religious objects. This issue is closely related to the previous ones, since those who support the presence of *Harry Potter* books in public schools will often claim both that the books and films are fantasy and that they present a positive moral ("good") role model for children. Critics often argue either that Harry Potter represents a dangerous ("evil," real) religious point of view or that at the very least, Harry Potter should be perused under the watchful supervision of parents who serve as positive moral guides.

Supporters of *Harry Potter* claim that the books and films are clearly the product of a secular phenomenon, and as such are wholly appropriate for a public school environment. This perspective has resulted in an avalanche of educational products related to *Harry Potter*, including a number of internet sites and teaching guides aimed at helping teachers integrate *Harry Potter* into the classroom. Scholastic, one of the largest publishers of children's books, contains a page devoted exclusively to *Harry Potter*, and many teachers read the books in the classroom, with the help of numerous prepackaged guides introducing students to, among other issues, the problem of witch persecution in its historical context. Children will also find the books on the school library shelf, if they aren't already checked out, that is; or if they haven't been banned.

Critics of *Harry Potter* claim that the books and films are anything but secular and fiercely object to their presence in a public school environment. The *Harry Potter* books topped the 1999 list of most frequently challenged books in America.[11] As of November 2000, the *Harry Potter* books had been challenged more than 400 times in over 25 school districts in nineteen states. Ogden Carson, a third-grader at West Ridge Elementary School in Colorado at whose school *Harry Potter* was banned, says, "To me if people don't want kids reading these books, their kids shouldn't be in public school. They should be in private school - Christian school."[12] The issue is anything but simple. The church of All Saints in Guilford,

Surrey, had a special "*Harry Potter* Family Service," complete with changes to the Church of England liturgy.[13] To make matters more complicated, Gloucester Cathedral was used as Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in the films. Indeed, if the *Harry Potter* books and films can be charged both with representing a role model appropriate for Christian children and a slippery slope into the occult, how is it possible to claim they are not a religious tinder box?

Is *Harry Potter* to be viewed as a religious phenomenon? Absolutely, says Richard Abanes. The books and films present a religious worldview, which includes a smattering of "Buddhism and reincarnation," Roman, Greek, and Celtic mythology, astrology, Arthurian legend and Druid symbolism (29-31). "Also plentiful," Abanes adds, "are Rowling's many references to various demonic entities deeply connected to magic, witchcraft, and sorcery" (32) Does it matter, as supporters claim, that Harry Potter does not offer an accurate picture of Wicca, or is it enough that the books present any form of witchcraft, and that they have been used also in a Christian context?[14] Rowling herself does not see the books as religious and does not approve of book-banning. She says to Diane Rehm, "No book is going to be for every child ... If we ban every children's book that makes mention of magic or witches or wizards ... we are going to be removing three quarters of the classics from the bookshelves."

Herein lies the heart of the dilemma. Although many people will disagree with the points made by conservatives like Richard Abanes, Robert S. McGee, and Caryl Matrischiana and argue that their fear of *Harry Potter* may be frightfully exaggerated, there is grounds to concede that, nonetheless, there is a real issue here. In the face of growing knowledge about and tolerance of many different faith expressions, we seem to be experiencing an increasing difficulty to define 1) what separation of church and state really means; 2) what constitutes moral or immoral literature in the context of the public schools; and 3) how we should define fantasy literature in the same context. The phenomenon of *Harry Potter* is a religious phenomenon, precisely because it has forced us to face squarely what it really means to be tolerant of all religious expression in the modern age. The solution may not be to remove *Harry Potter* from the schools, but to reexamine what separation of church and state really means. Is such a division even possible, really? Is it possible to have real tolerance of all religious expression and also maintain separation of church and state? Might discussion of Harry Potter in the classroom be one means of opening the door to the pertinent question of what "religion" is and what it means to be "tolerant" of people practicing it in all of its manifestations, especially in a syncretistic and pluralistic modern world? Fantasy versus reality; good versus evil; secular versus religious. Perhaps these are not dichotomies after all, but invitations to dialogue in the face of modern definitions of religious expression that are larger than the traditional conservative Christian ethic and,

indeed, larger than the dichotomies discussed here suggest in their either/or fashion. When J.K. Rowling was asked in an interview what single thing she would change about the world, she replied, "I would make each and every one of us much more tolerant." The primary challenge of our modern predicament is that the enactment of such an ideal must include giving Harry, the Wiccans, the conservative Christians, and others, all seats in the classroom, or none of them.

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[1] For these figures and for gross earnings and rankings, see the *Movie Times (http://www.the-movie-times.com/thrsdir/alltime.mv?domestic+ByDG.)*.

[2] J.K. Rowling Interview on *The Diane Rehm Show*, National Public Radio (October 20, 1999).

[3] Michael G. Maudlin, "Virtue on a Broomstick." *Christianity Today* (September 4, 2000), 117-9.

[4] *Harry Potter and the Bible: The Menace Behind the* Magic (Camp Hill, Pennsylvania: Horizon Books, 2001), 22. Abanes has written books critical of what he deems inappropriate religious practices, including such titles as *Defending the Faith: A Beginner's Guide to Cults*; End-Time Visions: The Doomsday Obsessions; and *Journey to the Light: Near Death Experiences*.

[5] Cited in Neal, 16.

[6] Lindy Beam, "Exploring Harry Potter's World." *Focus on the Family* 24:5 (May 2000), 15

[7] This video is produced by Jeremiah Films (http://www.jeremiahfilms.com).

[8] Connie Neal, *What's A Christian to Do with Harry Potter?* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: Waterbrook Press, 2001).

[9] Her point has one major flaw, however; if one did offer one's child as a human sacrifice, the issue of exposure to Harry Potter would then be a moot one.

[10] See I Corinthians 8-10.

[11] For information about a report by the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom, see the archived article at: http://www.cesnur.org/recens/potter_060.htm.

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[12] See "Harry Potter Expelled from School," by Holly Kurtz, Denver Rocky Mountain News, Nov. 6, 1999 ("http://www.cesnur.org/recens/potter_06.htm").

[13] For a similar approach at St. Elizabeth Seton Church in Syracuse, New York, see "Church Puts Faith in Harry Potter," by Phil Miller, from the *Sunday Times*, Sep. 2, 2001.

[14] For a Wiccan perspective on Harry Potter, see "Wiccans are not all that Wild about Harry Potter" by Jan Glidewell, from the St. Petersburg Times, Nov. 16, 2001 (http://www.cesnur.org/2001/potter/nov_12.htm).